

Clinton Unveils Science Agenda, Vows Energy Race

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Fifty years ago Thursday, in a remote part of the Soviet Union, a space satellite known as Sputnik sent back signals to Earth and signaled to the United States that it needed to enter the space race.

Within weeks, President Dwight D. Eisenhower addressed the nation with a vision to invest more in science, mathematics and innovation. In addition to launching NASA, the United States opened the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, a research arm of the Defense Department that developed the Internet, and passed a law that boosted math and science education.

At a speech at the Carnegie Institute to mark the Sputnik anniversary, Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., contrasted the 1950s reaction to Sputnik with Bush administration policies, which she described as "open season on open inquiry." The Democratic presidential contender said President Bush's policies are "putting the future at risk and letting global competitors get ahead."

"When I am president, I will end this assault on science," Clinton said. Specifically she promised to lift the ban on federal embryonic stem-cell research, ban the practice of political appointees altering scientific reports, continue space exploration, and fully fund NASA's earth sciences program and climate-change research.

Clinton received the loudest applause for promising to appoint a scientist who would report directly to the president on science and technology policy, and later for a pledge to invest in energy research to make the United States a leader in energy innovations.

"Winning the 21st-century energy race is as important and potentially profitable as winning the 20th-century space race," Clinton said.

She also advocated studying which math and science programs work and then replicating them. In addition, she said she favors visas for highly skilled foreign students to stay in the United States after graduation and a move toward health information technology.

Tech industry leaders also see the last three items as ways to help boost innovation now.

"The anniversary of Sputnik should serve as a reminder that we must never take our innovation leadership for granted," said Robert Hoffman of Oracle, who also serves as co-chairman of Compete America. He added that more countries than ever are challenging that leadership.

"Each day that goes by with no action on the policy barriers that inhibit U.S. competitiveness is a Sputnik day for those countries that are seeking to gain ground and challenge U.S. innovation leadership," he said.

Susan Traiman of the Business Roundtable is marking the Sputnik anniversary by lobbying for the funding authorized by a new law aimed at boosting math and science education. She said that without the funding, the new measure and research and development "is just symbolic."

"Sputnik was visible. You could see it orbiting the earth," Traiman said. "Our concern is our competitive challenges [now] are not as visible to those who haven't traveled the world to see what other countries are doing."

"We're hoping Americans won't wait for a Sputnik moment," Traiman said, adding that next time it may be too late to catch up.